

## Resisting or Adapting? How Private Catholic High Schools in Quebec Respond to State Secularism and Religious Diversification

### Résister ou s'adapter? Les réponses des écoles privées catholiques à la laïcité de l'État et la diversification religieuse au Québec

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Résumé de l'article

Depuis les années 1960, le système d'éducation au Québec s'est trouvé au centre des débats sur la laïcité. Se situant dans de plus larges débats universitaires sur les processus de sécularisation et de déconfectionnalisation des institutions publiques, de diversification religieuse de la société et de reconfiguration du catholicisme, nous visons dans cet article à analyser la façon dont les écoles privées catholiques répondent, dans le Québec post-catholique, aux défis posés par les pressions sécularisantes de l'État et à la diversification religieuse de leurs populations cibles. Nous basant sur une étude de cas qualitative menée dans deux écoles secondaires catholiques ou d'orientation catholique (une anglophone et une francophone) partiellement financées par l'État au Québec, nous soutenons que les approches observées, très différentes, résultent pourtant toutes deux de processus de sécularisation interne particuliers que ces deux écoles ont vécus. Nous nous appuyons sur la notion de « défense culturelle » de Steve Bruce et sur la conceptualisation de différentes trajectoires de sécularisation de David Martin pour interpréter ces résultats.

# *Resisting or Adapting? How Private Catholic High Schools in Quebec Respond to State Secularism and Religious Diversification*

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## **Abstract:**

*The education system in Quebec has found itself at the center of the debates about secularism since the 1960s. Embedded in broader academic debates about processes of secularization and deconfessionalization of state institutions, religious diversification of society, and reconfiguration of Catholicism, this article aims to analyze how private Catholic schools in post-Catholic Quebec respond to the challenges posed by the secularizing pressures of the state, and the religious diversification of their target populations. Based on a qualitative case study conducted in two private-partially-publicly-funded Catholic or Catholic-oriented high schools (one Anglophone, one Francophone) in Quebec, we argue that the different approaches observed result from the different processes of internal secularization that these two schools have gone through. We draw on Steve Bruce's notion of "cultural defense" and David Martin's conceptualization of different trajectories of secularization to interpret these results.*

## **RÉSISTER OU S'ADAPTER? LES RÉPONSES DES ÉCOLES PRIVÉES CATHOLIQUES À LA LAÏCITÉ DE L'ÉTAT ET LA DIVERSIFICATION RELIGIEUSE AU QUÉBEC**

### **Résumé :**

*Depuis les années 1960, le système d'éducation au Québec s'est trouvé au centre des débats sur la laïcité. Se situant dans de plus larges débats universitaires sur les processus de sécularisation et de déconfessionnalisation des institutions publiques, de diversification religieuse de la société et de reconfiguration du catholicisme, nous visons dans cet article à analyser la façon dont les écoles privées catholiques répondent, dans le Québec post-catholique, aux défis posés par les pressions sécularisantes de l'État et à la diversification religieuse de leurs populations cibles. Nous basant sur une étude de cas qualitative menée dans deux écoles secondaires catholiques ou d'orientation catholique (une anglophone et une francophone) partiellement financées par l'État au Québec, nous soutenons que les approches observées, très différentes, résultent pourtant toutes deux de processus de sécularisation interne particuliers que*



*ces deux écoles ont vécu. Nous nous appuyons sur la notion de « défense culturelle » de Steve Bruce et sur la conceptualisation de différentes trajectoires de sécularisation de David Martin pour interpréter ces résultats.*

## **Introduction**

The debates over the presence of religion in the public sphere in Quebec have been highly politicized. In particular, the education system has found itself at the center of the debates about secularism in Quebec since the 1960s, and particularly since the late 1990s (Lefebvre 2014). The creation of the Ministry of Education in 1964 through Bill 60 (Racine 2015), which merged multiple schooling options into one system, and subsequent legal developments led to a situation in which secular structures and programs replaced confessional settings and pedagogy. All these changes have had tremendous consequences, especially for the public role and legitimacy of the Catholic Church, which finds itself in a much weaker position than it previously occupied (Van Arragon and Beaman 2015).

To date, a large proportion of the research on the intersection of religion and education in Canada has placed Quebec as its main focus. However, so far, most of the work on this topic has broached the public system and its progressive evolution to conform to new social and political realities. To the best of our knowledge, and after conducting an intensive literature review gathering more than 440 references from the whole Canada,<sup>1</sup> very little research, apart from Tremblay's doctoral thesis (2013) on a Jewish, a Muslim, and a Steiner school in the Greater Montreal metropolitan area and Hirsch's, Mc Andrew's and Amiraux's study on Jewish schools in Montreal (2015), has addressed how private, faith-based schools are responding to the challenges posed by the secularization and diversification of Quebec society. Thus, the arrangements and adaptations done by these institutions to keep and redefine their faith-based specificity and to respond simultaneously to the exigencies of a changing society remain understudied in the Quebec context. Our interest is specifically on the situation of Catholic and Catholic-oriented schools.

Embedded in the thriving field of research on processes of secularization and deconfessionalization of state institutions, religious

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<sup>1</sup> We would like to thank Morgan Hunter for her inestimable help on this task.

diversification of society and reconfiguration of Catholicism, this article aims to analyze how private Catholic schools in “post-confessional post-Catholic” Quebec (Casanova 2013: 119; Lefebvre 2013; Meunier 2015) respond to the challenges they face in terms of: a) the secularizing pressures of the state, and b) the religious diversification of their target populations. More precisely, we study how these high schools negotiate their position between the increasing secularization and diversification of Quebec society and their institutional religious character (Vanderwoerd 2004). Focusing on Catholic high schools in Quebec is relevant for various reasons. First, Catholicism is no longer the all-encompassing institution it used to be; therefore, Catholic high schools have increasingly faced the challenge of maintaining a distinctive identity (Rymarz 2010) and have had to renegotiate their character and place in Quebec society. Second, even though they are also required to conform to the ministerial programs, given their specific religious identity and mission, we expect them to respond differently to the changes in society and policy than secular public schools. Finally, these cases help us grasp the heterogeneity of responses given by Catholic actors to the challenges of secularization and diversification of Quebec society and, consequently, the various ways in which the Catholic Church is renegotiating its place and role in society.

Drawing on case-study research performed in two private, partially-publicly-funded Catholic and Catholic-oriented high schools (one Anglophone, one Francophone) in Quebec,<sup>2</sup> we argue that these institutions are facing these transformations from very different standpoints. The French Catholic Church underwent a process of internal secularization from the 1960s onwards, which very much facilitated the transition towards a secular model of education. For Anglo-Catholics in Quebec religious belonging, practice, and education still remain important components of their identity. As we will show, these two different starting points have implications for the institutional responses to both the secularizing pressures of the state and religious diversification.

We start with a brief overview of the literature about the relation between religion and education in Quebec. The following section provides contextual information about secularization and religious diversification in the province. We then move to present the two schools we studied and analyze

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<sup>2</sup> We make the distinction between Catholic and Catholic-oriented high schools according to their own identification and our own analysis.

their responses to secularization and religious diversification and the implications thereof for their distinctive institutional (Catholic) identity. In the next section, we attempt to explain the differences in the responses of the two schools against the backdrop of differential internal secularization processes. Finally, we provide some concluding remarks.

### **Religious Education, Religious Diversity, and Faith-based Schools**

The crossroads of education and religion is one of the most privileged venture points to study the processes of secularization, institutional deconfessionalization and religious diversity governance in liberal democracies (Berger 2014; Jödicke 2013). It is also a privileged location for studying the contestation of these processes, since the intersection between religion and education is a matter of lively social, political, and educational debate worldwide. The role of the school in socializing pupils in civic values, identities, and beliefs accounts for such a controversial relation (Van Arragon and Beaman 2015). Religious education is a battlefield between the secularizing trends of liberal states and the resistance of certain religious groups to their loss of space in the public sphere. Legal and political battles over the teaching of/about religions are to be found in many countries around the world (Beaman, Forbes and Cusack 2015; Halafoff and Lam 2015).

The disputes over the place and role granted to religion, and in particular to the Catholic Church, in schools in Quebec and the transformations of the education system have increasingly attracted scholarly attention. In their historical reviews, Boudreau (2011) and Mager (2002) trace the changes that have occurred in religious education in Quebec, from confessional instruction to the current secular disposition. Other authors have focused on the general debates that this process of deconfessionalisation of the school system has sparked off in Quebec and the challenges of religious diversity for these institutions (Mc Andrew 2010; Milot 2007, 2010; Milot and Estivalèzes 2008). Others have more specifically analyzed how the education system has reacted to the religious diversification of the population (Mc Andrew, Jacquet and Ciceri 1997). Issues related to the accommodation of religious diversity in public schools (Mc Andrew et al. 2008) and to the wearing of religious symbols (Koussens 2009; Stoker 2007; Syed 2013; Wayland, 1997) have been at the spotlight of academic research for some years now. More recently, research on the new and mandatory “*Éthique et culture religieuse*” (ECR) program, implemented by the Quebec Government in 2008,

has proliferated (Andreassen 2011; Bouchard 2009; Boudreau 2011; Estivalèzes and Lefebvre 2012; Estivalèzes, Tremblay and Milot 2013; Fujiwara 2011; Morris 2011; Van Praagh 2012).

So far, most of these studies have focused on secular public schools. How does all this translate in the case of faith-based institutions with a Catholic background? Do they resist and opt to keep a strong religious identity and maintain a certain institutional autonomy vis-à-vis the influence of the secular state, or do they adapt and incorporate the reforms in their daily functioning? And how do they address issues related to religious diversity? A few authors have worked specifically on the particular situation of Catholic schools. Rymarz (2013) compares the delivery of religious education in Canadian and Australian Catholic high schools, highlighting some of the main differences between both countries and the factors underlying them. Donlevy (2002) analyses how Catholic schools in Canada formally include the increasing number of non-Catholic students they cater to in the school community as well as the impact that the presence of those students has on Catholic students and teachers (Donlevy 2006, 2007). However, up until now, we know next to nothing about how these institutions in Quebec negotiate the tension between secular and religious authorities and how they face the diversification of society. Therefore, we analyze, from a sociological perspective, how two Catholic or Catholic-oriented high schools in that Canadian province negotiate such positions at the intersection of Catholicism, secularization and religious diversification.

### **Secularization and Diversification in Quebec**

Quebec has passed from being considered the most religious territory in North America until the 1960s, to be now seen as the most secularized place on the continent (Casanova 2013; Christiano 2007). The sharp decline in the public influence of the Catholic Church becomes particularly evident on the individual level of religiosity, the separation of church and state—even though the Catholic Church only enjoyed a semi-established status in Quebec—and the removal of most Catholic references from the nationalistic constructions of Quebec identity (Baum 2000; Seljak 2000; Lefebvre 2013; Meunier 2015) while Catholicism is still embedded in many cultural dimensions (Lefebvre, Béraud and Meunier 2015). These transformations were in part the result of a process of “internal secularization” (Chaves 1993) of the Quebec French Catholic Church, since members of the Church themselves were among the

supporters of these reforms (Guindon 1999; Gauvreau 2005). Coinciding with the spirit of Vatican Council II, “the Quebec Church and state learned to cooperate and compromise in a spirit of pluralism, reform, and tolerance” (Seljak 1996: 111).

The deconfessionalization of the school system is one of the most salient transformations of the so-called “Quiet Revolution” in the 1960s (Baum 2000). In the course of fifty years, several major events shook the Catholic and Protestant confessional edifices: among others, the adoption of the *Charter of the French Language* in 1977, the *Quebec Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms* in 1975, and the embedding of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* in the Canadian Constitution in 1982 (Cadrin-Pelletier 2005). School boards organized along linguistic lines (Anglophone/Francophone) replaced Catholic and Protestant school boards in 1997-1998 (Lefebvre 2014). The two last phases of this transition process from a confessional system to a secular one were significantly influenced by the recommendations drafted in the so-called “Proulx report” (1999) and later re-endorsed by the “Bouchard-Taylor report” (Milot 2010).<sup>3</sup> Bill 118 deconfessionalized all structures of the Ministry of Education and public schools in 2000,<sup>4</sup> including the replacement of the service of Catholic and Protestant pastoral care by the “Spiritual Care and Guidance and Community Involvement Service” (Racine, 2015). The final phase of this transformation was the implementation by law of the “*Éthique et culture religieuse*” (ECR) program in all primary and secondary schools (private schools included) in 2008.<sup>5</sup> This new program replaced the previous system of Catholic, Protestant, and moral education, which was instituted in 1983 to replace the preceding system based on the exemption from confessional teaching (Lefebvre and Barré 2010). The two main purposes of the ECR program are: a) the recognition of the other; and b) the pursuit of the common good. The program also promotes three competencies: to reflect on ethical questions, demonstrate an understanding of religious phenomenon, and engage in dialogue (MELS 2007).

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<sup>3</sup> These two reports are respectively the result of a working group and an advisory commission set out by the Quebec Government to discuss issues related to the presence of religion in the school system, in the first case, and the practices of reasonable accommodation, in the second.

<sup>4</sup> *Loi modifiant diverses dispositions législatives dans le secteur de l'éducation concernant la confessionnalité* (Bill 118, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> *Loi modifiant diverses dispositions législatives de nature confessionnelle dans le domaine de l'éducation* (Bill 95, 2005).

The ECR course was implemented in Quebec apparently without much controversy, either in the public or the private school sectors. Teachers attended training sessions funded by the Ministry of Education and schools adopted the program with ease. In the public sector, however, individual families presented demands for exemption. According to information provided by the Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport (MELS), there were 1645 demands in the academic year 2008-2009, 315 in 2009-2010, 103 in 2010-2011, 53 in 2011-2012 and 25 in 2012-2013. The final decision of the Supreme Court of Canada that ruled against a family asking for exemption in 2012 can explain the decrease in the number of demands over the years.<sup>6</sup> The situation in the private sector seems to be quite similar, with the majority of schools having implemented the ECR program without great discussion. The only case that stands out publicly, as we will show in the following subsection, is the Anglophone high school of our study.

Concurrently to the process of state and societal secularization, Quebec society has undergone a process of substantial religious diversification. The arrival of immigrants from all over the world and the conversion of Quebecers have boosted the public presence and visibility of religious minorities (Meintel and Mossière 2013). These phenomena have also had an impact on the school population, composed of pupils born in more than fifty different countries (MELS, 2012). In the case of private, French-speaking secondary schools belonging to the *Fédération des établissements d'enseignement privés* (FEEP, 2010), around 30% of the children enrolled in the academic year 2009/2010 came from families without religion or with a religion different than Catholicism, including Protestantism, Orthodoxy, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, Baha'i, Hinduism and Sikhism, among others. This figure, which goes up to over 40% in the Montreal region, makes the management of religious and cultural diversity one of the main challenges of the current school system in Quebec (Estivalèzes 2010).

## Methodology

This research consists of a qualitative case study conducted in two private-partially-publicly-funded Catholic or Catholic-oriented high schools in Quebec. Case study design allows an in-depth approach that is highly appropriate when *how* and *why* questions are the focus of the research (Yin

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<sup>6</sup> S.L. v. Commission scolaire des Chênes, 2012 SCC 7.



1994). We perform a similar-case comparison to capture *how* each of the schools navigates the gripping position at the crossroads of Catholicism, secularization, and diversification as well as understanding *why* they respond differently.

To approach this empirically, we looked at two different aspects: a) the type of teaching of/about religion(s) and b) the responses to religious diversity issues. The first dimension informs us about the position adopted by these schools towards the implementation of the so-called secular program “*Éthique et culture religieuse*” (ECR), the most recent requirement of the Ministry of Education to implement mandatory non-confessional teaching about religions. The second dimension sheds light on the understandings of and the institutional arrangements made to address practical issues related to religious diversity within the premises of the schools. Eventually, we look at how these two aspects impact the schools’ institutional identity.

The selection of the cases was done in two steps. The selection of the first case was driven by the theoretical and empirical interest in analyzing a particular high school, which politically and legally contested the secularizing policy of the Ministry of Education. This first case is what Gerring (2006) refers to as a single-outcome unit, because it has a very specific outcome: the rejection of the ECR course. To better understand why that single high school had adopted such a stance, in the second step, we selected another similar case, which shared all the basic institutional traits with the preselected school but the one dimension in which we are particularly interested. In other words, the two are highly-ranked, private high schools following the official curriculum of the Quebec Ministry of Education, both are Catholic or Catholic-oriented, located in urban areas and cater to relatively diverse student populations with regard to religion. The dimension we are interested in, and that ultimately keeps them apart, is the language community (English-speaking and French-speaking) to which they belong, which we surmise has implications in the ways religious issues are addressed.

After obtaining the ethics certificate from our university,<sup>7</sup> we conducted fieldwork between May and July 2014. We conducted twenty-two, individual, semi-structured interviews with different actors from the private Catholic

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<sup>7</sup> To keep anonymity, we do not disclose the identity of the schools and informants. We are aware of the fact that the specificities of one of the schools make it easily recognizable. We have the consent of the principal to include it into our research.

education system in Quebec, mainly school principals and teachers, but also chaplains and spiritual care providers, as well as with civic entities involved in public debates about the deconfessionalisation of the school system in Quebec. These narratives were, under the logic of complementarity (Greene et al. 1989), combined with the information provided by non-participant observations at the high schools and document analysis. Looking at the actual practices and sensing the personal experiences on the ground, the inquiry went beyond the informants' narratives and allowed a thorough understanding of each of the two cases.

### **School Responses to Secularization and Diversification**

#### *High School A: A "Faith-Permeated Organization"*

When one enters high school A, the first thing one finds is a statue of Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Society of Jesus. This English-speaking boys' high school is situated in an urban area of the City of Montreal where the concentration of Anglo-Quebecers is substantially higher compared to other areas of the city.<sup>8</sup> The religious profile of the students is mainly Catholic; yet, not all of those come from practicing families. Religious diversity is limited as a collateral effect of the *Charte de la langue française* (commonly known as Bill 101) because it obliges the enrollment of the children of non-Anglophone immigrants into the Francophone school system. Thus, students from non-English speaking immigrant families (the majority of Quebec immigrants) cannot be enrolled into high school A. However, the presence of students from religious backgrounds other than Catholic is not negligible, with Protestants being the most significant group alongside a smaller numbers of Orthodox, Jews, Muslims, Sikhs, the "non-religious" and others. Among staff members, Catholicism is also the predominant religion and many of the teachers are alumni of the school and highly committed to its religious mission. However, teachers from religious minorities are also to be found, as long as they show commitment to the school's values and to pursue a "spiritual journey." As one interviewee puts it:

We are a Catholic school; that's a big part of our identity, and it's part of what we are. And we want to ensure that the teachers that are on board are comfortable with the nature of the school and its values and its religious system and that in teaching they are willing to contribute to

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.cbc.ca/montreal/features/livingenglish/anglophone-census-map/> [Accessed on 9 October 2015].

that whole environment. Now, that doesn't mean that they are all Catholic.

Combining Jeavons (1998) as well as Sider and Unruh's (2004) criteria to grasp the religious character of organizations we can affirm that high school A is what Sider and Unruh (2004: 119) call a "*faith-permeated organization*" because explicit religious content impregnates the main organizational elements. High school A self-identifies as a Jesuit Catholic institution and maintains affiliation and a strong connection with the religious community of origin. Its mission statement contains references to God and the spiritual and religious formation of students. The religious dimension of the school is believed to be essential for the education of each community member, including teachers (for whom specific training sessions on Ignatian pedagogy are organized). More tangible expressions of the religious character of the school are evident in the leadership (board of governors and president) and staff, in which the presence of priests and chaplains is not only significant (four of them, compared to one in the other school) but also very visible because of their religious attire (black soutanes and clerical collars). Religious symbols and images all over the school facilities and a chapel also attest to the religious character of the school. Moreover, part of the monetary resources of this school come from the Society of Jesus. Regarding students and their families, this school prioritizes those who are Catholic and/or are interested in pursuing a spiritual journey. Looking at the organizational goals and services provided also evidences the centrality of religion for the school. The aim stated on the school's website to develop "the diverse and unique talents of each member of the [school] community, and encourage the use of these talents to serve others for the greater glory of God" clearly points towards this direction. Also, the high prevalence of regular religious practices as well as the frequent religious references in the quotidian functioning of the school, prayers in secular academic meetings and continuous references to God and the Gospels as models of how things should work in the school prove the highly explicit religious nature and militant Catholic identity of the high school. Concrete examples of this, such as the daily prayer—where everyone stops his or her activities and stands in silence—, the weekly examination of conscience, the monthly mandatory mass—where both students and teachers actively engage—, optional retreats, spiritual mentoring programs, religious celebrations as well as prayers and references to God during the parents' association meeting, were easily identifiable during the observations in the

school. This strongly committed Catholic identity has obvious implications for the way in which the school positions itself towards the ECR program and responds to religious diversity.

High school A is the only institution that contested first politically and then legally the ECR program. The arguments against adopting it pointed not to the very existence of the course, but to its mandatory character and pedagogical orientation. Its implementation as mandatory was perceived as disrespecting the autonomy and distinctiveness of the school both as a private and as a Catholic institution. The school's authorities and staff conceived of this secularizing measure as a direct attack against the very (religious) nature of the institution and its right to exist as such. The language of rights and freedoms, stemming from the Quebec (1975) and Canadian (1982) charters of rights and freedoms, is easily identifiable. As the following quotation from an interview shows, the school authorities felt that the Ministry had gone too far: "there was a sense that our freedom was being truncated (...), impeded (...). The other thing is (...) why does Government feel that they can legislate how we teach religion, what business of Government is it?" The act of having to teach such a subject from a secular perspective was perceived as incompatible with the Catholic mission of the school. As the president of the high school put it: "The problem with the imposition that everybody has to do it is the assumption that you can't do it from within your own faith." For high school A, the implementation of the ECR program implied sacrificing its religious character and, eventually, its very *raison d'être*: "That for me was the big question: are we allowed to be what we are or not?" The school formally asked for the recognition of equivalence for its long-standing course on "World Religions," a course about the major world religions taught from a Catholic perspective. The Ministry of Education did not recognize such an alternative and the case went to court. On March 2015, the Supreme Court of Canada,<sup>9</sup> in a majority decision, ruled partly in favor of the school: it allowed the teaching of Catholicism from a confessional perspective, provided that the teaching about other religions remained impartial. Until then, and without any control or interference by the Ministry's officials, the school had overtly been teaching religious education, Catholicism and World Religions, from a confessional perspective.

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<sup>9</sup> High School A v. Quebec (Attorney General), 2015 SCC 12, [2015] 1 S.C.R. 613.

In coherence with this attitude of preserving the confessional essence of the school, religious diversity among students and staff is not denied but, on the contrary, considered as part of “us religious people.” This sentiment is well expressed by one teacher:

We had some Hindu students who have different religious articles of clothing or whatever it is. There’s never been an issue with that. The school is definitely not gonna prevent that. (...) It’d be unfair for us to say “you can’t have your own freedom of religion,” yet we’re fighting the Government asking for freedom of religion.

Religious diversity in the English-speaking high school is acknowledged because it is seen as a source of enrichment, as “a plus” for the religious and spiritual life of the institution, rather than as a challenge or a source of conflicts. As some interviews with religion teachers reveal, high school A takes advantage of the possibility for students to learn from the experiences of their classmates:

If we have a student who is not coming to school because they are celebrating a Jewish holiday or a Muslim holiday, that should be acceptable. I don’t remember it’d ever been an issue. I’ve had students miss my class because of different Jewish holidays: not an issue for me. In fact, I think it’s quite good because then they come back to school two or three days later and they have a new experience that they can share with our students. And I think that one or two classes that he missed is made up by the experience that he can share with the other students ‘cause everyone else now gains from that.

In high school A, religious boundaries are blurred, not to erase differences between faiths, but to emphasize the values and aspects shared by the various religions. Inclusiveness and commitment to diversity are grounded in the belief that religious people—regardless of their faith—share common experiences.

Moreover, if we look at how concrete practices and religious requirements are dealt with, we find that religious diversity is conceived and experienced as something normal and taken for granted, and not as a challenge. As a Jewish teacher pointed out:

It’s amazing [laughter]. It’s absolutely amazing. [Religious diversity,] it’s never an issue, never an issue here. It’s incredible. I have felt more welcomed here than in many other schools. And when I leave on Friday, there’s always one of the priests who says to me “Shabbat Shalom” which is, you know, have a good Sabbath. And the director

will announce over the bulletin every morning if it's a Jewish holiday, he will wish, he will wish, if it's the Orthodox... When it's Ramadan, wishes are sent to the two Muslim boys.

This example is very telling about the way in which religious diversity is understood, experienced and dealt with in this school. Wassendorf (2010: 8) refers to this approach as “common place diversity,” which she defines as “ethnic, religious, linguistic and socio-economic diversity being experienced and perceived as a normal part of social life.” This normalcy with which religious diversity is experienced—at least by teachers and board members<sup>10</sup>—explains why rather than “reasonable accommodations,” what we find is a “day-to-day negotiation of difference” (Beaman 2014: 94). It also explains the difficulties that our interviewees had in listing examples of arrangements. In the words of the principal: “If I really sat down and thought about the number of things like that, that have happened, there have been quite a few, but it's so normal, that it's not, I don't think of them as being big issues.” Another simple example of these small arrangements is that with regard to non-Catholic students when attending the monthly mass. They are asked to cross their arms over the breast to warn the priest that they just want to receive a generic blessing (not a Trinitarian one) and no communion. Also, when they attend the retreats, the priests “just tell them to kind of put Christ in brackets a bit.”

We have called this way of dealing with religious diversity a “politics of small gestures.” This concept, borrowed from Hannula (2006: 3), combines the idea of “politics that is something of a large-scale entity with a small gesture that is something domestic, something about our daily realities.” In short, high school A approaches the “big issue” of religious diversity with small routine gestures.

#### *High school B: A “Faith-Background Organization”*

The external appearance of high school B has maintained its Catholic legacy. The name printed on the façade has kept the reference to the Jesuits. Some images hanging on the wall at the entrance of this co-educational school remind the visitant of its religious origins. Yet, this French-speaking high school is no longer part of the *Compagnie de Jésus*. Since the 1980s, the school fully belongs to a secular corporation. The latter, however, kept the mandate to continue the Jesuit mission in the context of a Catholic institution, as stated

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<sup>10</sup> Due to ethical restrictions, we could not access the opinions of students.

in its educational project. Yet, this programmatic document puts much less emphasis on its religious content (“education in opening to faith” and “to accompany the student in his/her spirituality”). Explicit references to Christ exist but the compromise of the new corporation is to keep and adapt the “Christian heritage.” By underlining its origins in the past, it opens the door to the redefinition of the “Jesuit tradition.” It is obvious how religious references have been relegated to a more marginal position and are presented in a “softer” version by way of blurring its confessional content with a more generic “spiritual” approach (Lefebvre 2015). The educational project states: “By way of accepting this heritage, the corporation has expressed its intention of promoting the humanist sense of the human being and the values attached to it in a context of respect for the freedom of conscience and of the religious and spiritual preferences of each person.” Other statements are made regarding the Christian character of the school, like the principal presenting it as a school “inspired by a Christian humanist tradition.” Yet, in this case, as opposed to high school A, where religious normativity underlies school functioning, religion and spirituality work more as a referential frame. This looser bond with religious normativity is also evident, for example, in the absence of regular prayers and religious services and the substitution of the figure of the chaplain by that of the spiritual caregiver in charge of the “Spiritual Care and Guidance and Community Involvement Service.” The latter, as the principal of the school argued, is not guided by a dogmatic approach, but by one that allows “the emergence of spirituality.” The chapel was replaced by a multipurpose room called the “Mystique Room” where—though oftentimes hidden by a mobile screen—a big cross is to be found. Non confessional meditation is combined with secular activities to improve the students’ self-esteem, self-confidence, and freedom. Religious attire is absent from the facilities of the school, even for the case of the one Jesuit that remains in the school. Unlike in high school A, the priest is in this case mostly addressed to by students as Monsieur X or just by his first name, instead of Père X. All this evidence demonstrates that the presence of religion occupies a much less prominent position than in high school A. The composition of the students’ population seems to reflect that of Quebec society, with a great majority of nominal Catholics and the presence of some students from religious minorities. These, as in the former school, represent, according to at-first-glance estimations of the school principal, a small percentage. Yet, in this case, as opposed to the first high school, the religious affiliation of the students

is not formally recorded, another piece of evidence pointing to the displacement of religion from the school. Moreover, only one person—out of the fourteen members of the board of governors—belongs today to the religious community. However, this individual is not a priest, but a laic representative. All these traits of a “softer” expression of religion allow us to identify this high school as being “Catholic-by-reference” as opposed to high school A, where “Catholic normativity” underlies the entirety of the school functioning.

We refer to this second school as a “*faith-background* organization,” understood as “organizations [that] tend to look and act secular, although they may have a historical tie to a faith tradition” (Sider and Unruh 2004: 120). This category is apt, because—as we later show—an important internal secularization stripped this school from its prior religious nature. This process of institutional secularization, boosted by the internal modernization of the Church and the pressure of the increasingly secular and diverse population, is not exceptional for this particular school. As has happened with many other formerly Catholic, French-speaking schools in Quebec following the so-called “Quiet revolution,” the contractual links with the religious communities of origin have been cut. In some explorative interviews conducted in another similar high school, we witnessed how the erasure of the Catholic footprint was even more drastic, and religious references and activities were mostly inexistent. Nevertheless, other cases, among the nearly 200 private francophone schools in Quebec, could be seen as somewhere in-between, with only few religious communities present—but none of them was studied in this particular research project.<sup>11</sup>

All these transformations within the school have resulted in implications for the ways in which the ECR program is being implemented. The prior “open confessionality” of the school, as the principal puts it, paved the way for a smoother passage to the ECR program. As he describes it, the fact that the school had taught its own course on “Religious Culture” since the 1970s

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<sup>11</sup> Three private schools associations exist in Quebec. The largest is the *Fédération des établissements d'enseignement privés*, with 194 schools and more than 110,000 pupils (about 12% of all students in Quebec). The *Federation* strongly supported the new program when it was implemented (<http://www.feep.qc.ca/>). The second association, mostly Anglophone, but with a few Francophone members as well, the *Quebec Association of Independent Schools*, comprises 23 schools, some religious, some secular (<http://www.qais.qc.ca/>). The third one is the *Association of Jewish Schools* with only 13 French and English schools.



prepared the school for not having any problems when the ECR was to be implemented. In his own words, “the passage to that course was done in a natural way. It was evident for people; (...) it was a natural movement. Here we had a way of doing things that allowed a harmonious transition. (...) in this school the ECR wasn’t a breakdown with the past.” In this case, then, the passage to the ECR program was not perceived as traumatic or even challenging. In fact, as some informants told us, the ministerial program was somehow inspired by the guidelines of the French-speaking Jesuit curriculum on “Religious Culture” and informed indirectly by the reflections of people and organizations linked to the French province of the Jesuits (e.g. *Centre justice et foi*).<sup>12</sup>

The approach to religious diversity in this school differs substantially from that of the former school. Spirituality, and not so much religion, while considered an important dimension of the development of pupils, is seen more as a private matter, which does not intervene directly in the daily life of the institution. The school encourages the internal and spiritual development of its students, independently of their faith. The ability of the interviewees from the Anglophone context to list the religious affiliation of their students and staff in a quite precise way contrasts with a stronger lack of awareness thereof by the actors from high school B. Contrary to what happens in high school A, high school B does not do pre-enrollment interviews with families to talk about the religious baggage of the school and of the family. As one teacher told us, she only knows about the faith of her students in two cases: when the religious attire of the student or of his/her parents (especially Muslim women) is visible or when the student himself / herself talks about his/her religion.

Moreover, our informants affirm that religious matters have never been an issue and that the school has never been asked for accommodations. Only they could recall two cases related to Muslim students. In the first case, the school offered the student’s parents the option to rearrange exam schedules during Ramadan if need be. In the second case, a student asked for specific food in a school dinner. However, and in contrast to high school A, these demands are dealt with in a less public way. Religious diversity is respected, but is not as overtly celebrated as in the English-speaking school, where non-Catholic students would not hesitate to audibly affirm their religious

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<sup>12</sup> This information was provided to us in two different interviews.

affiliation. Indeed, teachers at high school A recognized that non-Catholic students would even feel proud of their distinctiveness, something that contrasts with the situation in high school B, where students tend to be more reluctant to publicize their faith. A teacher in the French-speaking school told us that one Muslim student of hers was reluctant to allude to his religion because he had felt verbally attacked by his peers. However, the teacher was able to correct the situation throughout the school year by highlighting his academic performance. She even saw this student as a potential trigger for a more positive image of the Muslim population:

I know it is difficult for him. But I think he has a very important role to play in this school because it is possible that one day there will be someone who will say “not all Muslims are like that because there was one in my class and he was very nice” or “he was my friend.” He is a very interesting and lively kid. And I have the impression that he has an important role to play to demystify certain things and nuance the gaze that we can have regarding this religion.

### **Comparative Discussion**

The two selected schools share many basic institutional traits. Yet, they differ significantly in their responses to state secularism and religious diversification. Why are some Catholic schools in Quebec more willing to maintain clear-cut boundaries between the religious and the secular fields (Reuter 2009) and maintain a strong religious identity than others? Why do some schools opt for a more privatized approach to religious diversity and others deal with it more overtly? In this section, we attempt to explain these differences.

First, we have observed two different—even opposed—approaches to the teaching of religions in the context of ECR: “contestation,” in high school A, and “smooth implementation” in high school B. While high school A strongly advocates the confessional teaching of religion as part of its institutional identity and commitment to socializing pupils, high school B has opted for a more cultural approach to teaching about religions. Paradoxically, the two high schools had been frontrunners in the implementation of a “World Religions” and a “*Culture religieuse*” course already in the 1970s, prior to the Ministry’s policy. Yet the approach adopted in each case seems quite different. While the high school A designed a course on “World Religions” taught from a Catholic confessional perspective, high school B took a more cultural approach in its “*Culture religieuse*” course. This divergence resulted in the former perceiving the ECR’s non-confessional character as conflicting with its

way of teaching about other religions and in the latter perceiving the implementation of the ECR course as the “normal process” to follow.

Second, the different place and role accorded to religion in each school is also reflected in the ways they address religious diversity issues. High school A encourages the public and visible expression of religious identities and practices of its students and staff as a distinctive trait of the institution, whereas high school B is closer to the French republican tradition. Thus, in general, the latter fosters a more privatized expression of individual religiosity, following the gradual process of watering down the presence and role of religion in its functioning. These differences have become apparent in many examples of how each of them celebrates religious diversity overtly or rather keeps it in a lower profile.

To explain these differences we focus on the main structural variable that differentiates these schools, namely the cultural-linguistic community to which they belong. However, it is not language itself that explains the differences, but the diverging extent of “internal secularization”—understood as “the declining control of religious authority within religious organizations themselves” (Chaves 1993: 3)—that these two milieus have undergone. In other words, religious authority and normativity are still at the basis of the functioning of high school A, whereas in high school B the latter have been increasingly replaced by secular authorities, norms, and procedures. But why has the English-speaking Catholic community in Quebec gone through a less far-reaching and intense process of secularization? We explain this drawing on Bruce’s notion of “cultural defense” (2008).

Bruce argues that in those settings where religion remains a highly relevant factor for group identity, secularization is obstructed or delayed. More specifically, he claims that “religion often provides resources for the defense of a national, local, ethnic or status-group culture” (Bruce 2008: 31). In our case, and as confirmed by both English- as well as French-speaking interviewees, religion remains a crucial identity marker for the cultural-linguistic community represented by high school A. This trait can be credited to the minority status that the latter occupies at different levels: a) Anglophone within the Francophone Quebec majority; b) religious within a highly secularized context; c) Catholic within the Protestant Anglophone majority in Canada (French-speaking Jesuits jokingly call their English-speaking

counterparts “*Jésuites protestants*”); and d) committed Catholic within the non-practicing Catholic majority.

Using Bruce’s argument, the fact of being a minority in various ways can explain why there has been a much weaker process of internal secularization as opposed to Quebec French Catholicism. Internal secularization has not occurred in such a pronounced way because religion remains central for group identity. The Anglo-Catholic identity was and is not taken for granted, as was the case for Franco-Catholics. As recounted by one of our Francophone interviewees:

Anglo-Catholics in Quebec, like Anglo-Catholics in the rest of Canada are not a majority, as Quebec French Catholics were. Quebec Anglo-Catholics have a different relation with their faith community. (...) French Quebec identity was crossed by religion. It was something that was obvious, while Anglo-Catholics have experienced it as an important meeting space. For us, it was taken for granted and when we chose that religion was no longer a significant reference, everything is gone with it.

We argue that the need to “preserve” religion as an identity marker to reinforce the group boundaries of Anglo-Catholics in Quebec, along with other factors, explains why for them religious authorities and institutions—such as churches and faith-based schools—are a cornerstone for cultural reproduction and the maintenance of their collective Catholic identity. In this case, religion and religious institutions maintain functions beyond mediating individuals and the supernatural; they enhance people’s loyalty to the group.

More largely, the distinction between Anglophones and Francophones crosses the theory of secularization, arguing that different types of secularization are occurring, depending on the social and cultural contexts. The province of Quebec is seen as a laboratory to explore the differences between an Anglo-Saxon trajectory of secularization, and a Latin- and French-type of secularization. The first one, seen more in Protestant countries with other minority religions like Catholicism, is more flexible and shows less direct oppositions between the state and religions. The second one reveals a rivalry between the dominant Catholic Church and the State, between a religious and a secular ethos (Martin 1978 2000; Champion 1993; Lefebvre 2008; Meunier and Wilkins-Laflamme 2011). This could also partly be a source of differentiation between high school A and high school B.

## **Conclusions**

This research adds to the study of the reconfiguration of Catholicism in the context of secularization and religious diversification by analyzing the responses of Catholic or Catholic-oriented high schools in Quebec to state secularism and the changing religious profile of their student and staff populations. As we have shown through looking at education institutions, French-speaking Catholicism in Quebec has traversed the path of secularization in an internal and more gradual fashion than the Anglophone Catholic milieu. This explains why the former does not perceive state secularism as threatening for its very Catholic identity, while Anglo-Catholics, who remain more attached to religion as an identity marker, perceive the secularizing policies of the state as an external imposition. The Francophone high school has kept its religious character in a much lower profile than the Anglophone high school, thereby making the implementation of the ECR course something smooth and non-controversial. Conversely, dealing with, and celebrating, religious diversity is something where the individuals in high school A feel more at ease precisely for the very same reason: religion is part of the institution and is lived as something normal.

The last conclusion to be drawn from our findings is the significant entanglement that remains in force in Quebec between national and religious identities. The ways the high schools from our study respond to matters of religion cannot be isolated from matters of group identification among linguistic communities. It also reports the different relations established between French and English Canadian Catholics with Catholicism and the Catholic Church themselves. The internal secularization observed in a great part of the Francophone milieu has passed over the Anglophone milieu, which remains strongly attached to a more formal and clerical form of Catholicism. This must be understood in terms of the majority-minority divide, even if this majority-minority condition is context-relative. The main difference between the schools in our study seems to be the language community. Yet, in the context of Quebec, as Caldwell argues (1994), this element marks a great social divide.

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